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ABSTRACT

Learning and developmental theories establish a basis for realistically evaluating expectations for responsible sexual behavior by adolescents. Knowledge of the ways in which individuals learn and of the characteristic developmental levels and stages of an individual's physical, cognitive, and psychosocial development should be applicable in guiding adolescents toward responsible sexual decisionmaking. A developmental-learning model for responsible behavior in children would involve a progression of situational experiences, and learning would take place through modeling, imitation, reward, and punishment. As children reach adolescence, their developmental concerns center on individual growth, self-knowledge, and identity consolidation. For most, the formal operations level of cognitive skill required for decision-making is not yet attained. Teenagers are dependent upon outside sources for accurate information and for models, mentors, and guides. The extent to which youths demonstrate responsibility in their sexual behavior bears a direct relationship to what they are taught. Society, and the institutions and adults in it, must recognize and accept its responsibility for helping to prepare adolescents to be responsible sexual decisionmakers; it is unrealistic to expect youth to do it on their own. (NRB)

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RESPONSIBLE ADOLESCENT SEXUAL BEHAVIOR: ARE WE EXPECTING TOO MUCH?

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ABSTRACT

Responsibility, sexual behavior and decision making are discussed within a theoretical framework of adolescent development. Difficulties in application of theory to behavior are inherent in both the current societal environment and also in the cognitive, psychosexual and psychosocial stages at adolescence. The paper concludes that adults are expecting too much from adolescents in terms of responsible sexual decision-making, if their expectations exceed their input and involvement in assisting and guiding young people to achieve this goal.

RESPONSIBLE ADOLESCENT SEXUAL BEHAVIOR: ARE WE EXPECTING TOO MUCH?

Self is central to the concept of responsibility. Individuals are responsible FOR their own actions and FOR the welfare of others; most are responsible TO some higher power--a parent, an employer, an administrator. Responsibilities may be multiple and varied demanding low or high level skills. Responsibility is not an inherited characteristic. Nor does it develop automatically. Attitudes, values and behaviors are incorporated into the concept and responsibility must be taught, learned, experienced and practiced.

Sexual behavior, on the other hand, is developmental in nature and, for the adolescent, is tied closely to physiological and hormonal changes. The major tasks are psychosocial in nature and apply not only to sexual behavior; essential are self acceptance and ability to communicate and interact with others. At adolescence, sexual development accelerates, body changes are rapid and unpredictable and sexual urges are powerful. The psychosexual demands take precedence over the psychosocial with self as the focus of interest.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Learning and developmental theories establish a basis for realistically evaluating expectations for responsible sexual behavior by adolescents.

Learning Theory

Several theories are applicable to the process of becoming responsible. According to social learning theory, observing appropriate role models and imitating their actions result in the desired behavior. The behaviorist approach emphasizes conditioning through reinforcement

of desired responses. Cognitive theory focuses on understanding the dimensions of both the concept and the process, and also the relationships between various factors, events and actions.

Low level skills are necessary to respond to the positive stimulus provided when an action is rewarded or to extinguish a response which is punished. In the first instance, responsible behavior is rewarded; in the second, irresponsible behavior which is punished ceases and the individual is conditioned to respond in a more appropriate manner.

When modelling the behavior of an admired or powerful person, reward is provided by identifying with this individual and imitating the responsible attitudes and behaviors.

Responsible behavior resulting from the individual's thoughtful decision rather than from an habitual method of responding requires complex skills. These skills can be learned, however, they require a high level of cognitive ability.

Cognitive development. Piaget[16] has set forth an ordered sequence in the way people think. By the end of childhood the concrete operations stage should have been mastered allowing the adolescent to move to the formal operational level. In the concrete stage the child focusses on relations between objects which are classified, categorized and ordered. In formal operations the individual has the ability to think not only about realities but also about possibilities. Abstract thought, hypotheses formation and consideration of what could and might happen, and about consequences and results is possible. The individual can deal with ideas without experiencing concretely or having concrete materials available for illustration and manipulation.

Ginsburg and Opper[6] have identified four influences or factors

in cognitive development: (1) maturation of the nervous system, (2) active personal physical experiences, (3) environmental effects (including culture, language and education), and (4) equilibration. Equilibration is the process of organizing new information and experiences in terms of what one already knows and understands and in relationship to how one is thinking at the moment. New information is assimilated into the cognitive structure changing it but at the same time retaining balance and equilibrium.

There is evidence[9] that all adolescents do not attain formal operations, rather, the normal adolescent will reach formal operations in the late teens or early twenties if at all. Arlin[4] has suggested that a fifth stage in cognitive development may occur either after formal operations or as a part of formal operations. He sees two processes taking place, first the problem-solving process followed by the problem finding stage. Cognitive development appears to be a complicated process influenced by individual physiological, sociocultural influences and it seems that formal operations develop during adolescence but that not all adolescents attain formal operations.

Developmental Theory

During the adolescent stage of development, bodily and hormonal changes impel the adolescent to seek resolution of personal identity problems. At the same time society exerts new pressures which must be dealt with. For example, outcomes of Havighurst's[8] developmental tasks for adolescence are, responsibility, values, independence, and sex role identification, and future orientation toward marriage, family and career.

Physical development. Biological and physiological changes at puberty are multiple and rapid and many are observable. There is

great variation in age of onset and completion. Here, only menses and ejaculation will be discussed since these processes relate to the sexual decisions which adolescents face. In much of Europe where the most information is reported and the most complete records are kept, menarche has occurred earlier by about 4 months per decade since 1890. However the trend is beginning to slow down and in Oslo and London it has apparently stopped at an average age of 12.95 years.[19] In the U.S., findings are similar. A 1976 report of a ten year study of 800 girls in the Boston area revealed the average age of menarche to be 12.8 years, the same as it was 30 years ago. The girls' ages at menarche ranged from nine to eighteen years.[1]

In terms of child-bearing, there appears to be a two or three year period of physiological sterility that follows menarche. Thus girls could conceive as early as 11 years with 14.8 years as the average.[3] From 1870 to 1930, the mean age of onset of menstruation fell from 16.5 years to age 14.5. Thus the average age of possible conception in 1870 was 18.5 years; in 1930, 16.5 years and in 1976, 14.8 years. The average age of first seminal emission is just under 14 years.[17]

Psychosocial development. Erik H. Erikson[5] has proposed a stage theory of psychosocial development. He sees the crucial developmental stage for adolescents as Identity vs. Identity (or Role) Diffusion, and the adolescent period as a psychosocial moratorium. He attributes the crises at each developmental stage to the demands of society. At this stage individuals are psychosexually at puberty, are most influenced by the peer group and by out groups, are searching for models of leadership and are attempting to find out who they are as

unique entities, and to determine what unique values they share with their chosen group. Knowing who they are and where they are going is an important task, and in our culture, especially for the male, who you are is often identified as what you do. Thus in our society, work or career choice is an important task of adolescence.

Not until completion of puberty, solution of the identity crisis and entry into the young adult stage does Erikson designate the crisis, "intimacy and solidarity vs. isolation," as the crucial task to be faced. At this stage partners in friendship, sex, competition and cooperation are influential and psychosocially the individual seeks to lose and find himself in another, while psychosexually, genitality assumes primacy.

Marcia[12] has identified for males four different states within the Erikson Identity stage; moratorium, closure, identity diffusion and identity achievement. Offer[15], in a study of normal adolescent males, found that the average age for identity consolidation was 19 years.

APPLICATION OF THEORY

Knowledge of the ways in which individuals learn and of the characteristic developmental levels and stages should be applicable in guiding adolescents toward responsible sexual decision-making.

Responsibility

Ideally, parents or caregivers and later teachers and employers will structure situations and provide direction and guidance toward responsible behavior. On entry into the adult world, the individual would have a backlog of experience in responsibility, a willingness to accept it, and the ability to generalize from specific situations to

similar or unique ones where responsible behavior is required. In other words, the young adult would be a responsible individual. This is not a new concept. Aristotle identified the critical task for youth during the years from puberty to age twenty-one as "the ability to choose"; the individual must make moral, physical, and social choices and only by doing so will he be able to reach maturity.[14]

A developmental-learning model for responsible behavior would involve a progression of situational experiences; the pre-schooler rewarded for taking responsibility for putting away toys, the young child given an allowance to manage, the student in primary grades sharing responsibility for classroom organization and discipline.

Learning would take place through modelling, imitation, reward and punishment. Throughout these years, the child will make minor decisions in which risk is minimal and error is not too costly, laying the groundwork for more complicated and serious decision making, such as that related to sexual behavior. Thus, through a naturally-occurring, graded series of every day, home and school events the child would develop responsible, decision-making attitudes, values, and skills.

Sexual Decision-Making and Behavior

In terms of physical development, the early teenage girl is menstruating and by mid-adolescence is capable of childbearing. The early teenage male can impregnate. Psychosexually, according to Erikson, one would expect the adolescent decision-maker to be influenced by peer group members, to be egocentric and self-centered, and to be motivated to move toward career goals. One would not see intimacy in sexual intercourse as one of the tasks for the adolescent, since

genitality and the need to lose and find oneself in another is designated as a task of young adulthood.

However, Maddock[11] feels that sexual expression might very well be seen as a normative form of interaction between adolescents who are engaged in a mutual search for identity. He does admit that a premature commitment is a threat to the psychic structure of the adolescent since it imposes rigid restrictions upon one's emerging self identity or life style. Also he recognizes the risks Erikson has pointed to, of premature identity closure, the abortive attempt at intimacy without sufficient ego strength, a loosening or loss of sex role identity and identity confusion. He points to the need to discover what is the age appropriate level of intimacy for the adolescent experience, those sexual expressions which can normatively precede commitment and can serve as identity testing exercises. He suggests that with separation of sex from reproduction, full sexual intercourse could be a conceivable option and that intimacy could become the new basis of identity.

Piaget's developmental schema suggests that few adolescents attain true formal operational cognitive development capable of problem solving and problem finding. Many will remain at the concrete operational or initial formal operations level and there will be wide differences between adolescents depending upon environment and ability. In terms of cognitive development, Psychiatrist Amini[18] notes that processing information concerning sexuality and sexual identity must be completed before sexual maturity can be reached. The facts about anatomy and physiology can be learned but the psychological aspects, the actual functioning in an emotional context is much more complicated and must be preceded by the anatomy and physiology information. He

points out that beginning menses does not necessarily ensure that a girl has mastered the cognitive processes necessary to deal with the information. If dealing with the information necessitates decision-making about sexual behavior, then the adolescent needs to use the formal operations level of thinking, which involves the processes of defining the problem, seeking out alternative courses of action, hypothesizing about cause and effect, and evaluating possible and probable outcomes of selected actions. All of these, according to Piaget, would not be functions which most adolescents could easily do with a high degree of competency.

REALITY

Before the turn of the century, adolescence as a unique stage with special needs and developmental tasks was unknown. Children were viewed as miniature adults who, at puberty, moved from child status to that of adult. In many respects, the same is true today, with both youth and adult at similar stages, halfway between childhood and maturity. Similarities also exist in terms of responsibility and decision-making.

The orderly movement toward responsible decision-making and behavior as an adult characteristic presupposes parents, teachers and others who value this attribute and are commited to modeling and teaching responsibility as a way of life. However, the increased number of families with both parents working, the high divorce rate, and the number of one-parent households has deprived the young of the guidance they need. The casual, self-centered attitude of many parents who are seeking alternative life-styles produce adolescent models for their adolescent children. The "me" attitude of many

adults is resulting in a "me" generation of teen-agers.

Competing with existing, or substituting for non-existing adult role models who could influence sexual decision making, adolescents have peers and the mass media. Peers will reflect attitudes and behaviors, either of significant others or of media models. Interpretation, imitation and adoption of the modelled behavior will be influenced by individual perceptions related to current needs. Inaccurate and inappropriate concepts, attitudes and behaviors are the probable results. Adults, in negating their responsibility toward youth, propel them to seek unreliable, unsuitable and incompetent mentors and models.

The gap between teen-agers and their adult parents is narrowing and shifting the focus toward the adolescent stage. On the other hand, for the young person, in many ways, the shift is toward early adulthood. Compared to their peers of the '60's, the young of the '80's are more traditional, more religious, and less rebellious. They are more cynical and self-centered, concerned about "What's in it for me?" Their aspirations and problems resemble those of adults; major concerns are jobs, future and the possibility of nuclear war.

Increasing numbers of adolescents have part-time jobs, however, these involve low-level tasks which require little thinking. Food service is by far the most common type of employment. For all part time jobs, for a sample of high school students, Greenberger and Steinberg[7] report that total time spent on reading, writing, or arithmetic on the job averages only seven percent or about four minutes for every hour worked. In terms of developing the kind of responsibility which requires high level cognitive capacities, these early work experiences

contribute very little.

Socially, sexual behavior is modelled by peers and adults and there is peer pressure and adult modelling for early intercourse, cohabitation, sex without involvement, use of contraception and abortion, self as central, others as responsible for children, easy in and out whether it be intercourse, relationships, conception, or marriage. Also the emphasis is on the here and now rather than on the future. And there is a confusing message, "I am in charge but the peer group is what is important." This confusing social setting does not facilitate responsible sexual decision-making. Psychosocially, the adolescent should be thinking through goals and values and deciding. But this is extremely difficult with so many options and so many mixed messages about future stability and lack of firm delineation of either a masculine or feminine career goal and role.

More than a million pregnancies occur yearly among teen-agers. A 1981 report by the Alan Guttmacher Institute[2] projected that four of every ten girls aged 14 would become pregnant at least once during their teen years, two of ten would give birth, and more than one in seven would have an abortion. According to the report one point three million children are being raised by teen-age mothers, half of them unmarried. An additional one point six million children are living with mothers who were in their teens when they delivered. The average age at the time of first sexual experience is sixteen and the highest rate of increase is for the fifteen year old white girl.

CONCLUSION

Giving birth to a child is the most important sexual decision an individual can make. Many other questions must be answered relative

to this final outcome. Decisions about sexual intercourse--use of contraception, seeking abortion, and after delivery, the problems of giving a child up for adoption, raising it alone or marrying--form a chain of sexual decision making.[10]

The sobering statistics on the rising incidence of early adolescent pregnancy reflect their ability and desire to behave as sexual individuals and also their inability and/or lack of desire to make responsible sexual decisions.

The developmental concerns of adolescents center on individual growth, self-knowledge and identity consolidation. For most, even under ideal learning conditions, the formal operations level of cognitive skill required for decision-making is not yet attained. Young people are dependent upon outside sources for accurate information and as models, mentors, and guides. The extent to which youth demonstrate responsibility in their sexual behavior bears a direct relationship to what they are taught and what they learn about it.

Until society, the institutions and the adults in it, recognizes and accepts its responsibility for helping to prepare adolescents to be responsible sexual decision makers, it is unrealistic to expect youth to do it on their own. Learning and developmental theories provide a sound basis on which to build a suitable approach to this complex problem. Decision-making is a difficult process; however models are available[13] and the necessary steps can be learned. Application of these skills to sexual behaviors is much more complicated. Attitudes, values and motivational factors are strong determinants of decision outcomes. Finally, for the initial question, "Responsible adolescent sexual behavior: Are we expecting too much?", the answer is, "Yes, if

our expectations exceed our input and involvement in assisting and guiding young people toward this important goal."

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